

THE BUILDING OF "REVERIE" IN LAGRANGE, TN
INTERVIEW WITH
JOHN WALLEY

BY - J. H. DEBERRY
ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE
MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY



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JUNE 8, 1970

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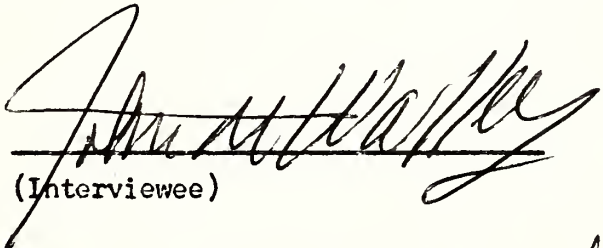


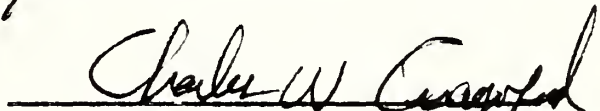
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PLACE Memphis, Tenn

DATE June 8, 1970.


(Interviewee)


(For the Mississippi Valley Archives
of the John Willard Brister Library
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THIS IS MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE PROJECT,
LaGRANGE, TENNESSEE. THE DATE IS JUNE 8, 1970. THE INTERVIEW IS WITH
MR. JOHN WALLEY, LaGRANGE, TENNESSEE. THE INTERVIEWER IS J. H. DeBERRY.

DR. DeBERRY: John, if you will, tell me something about Reverie.

MR. WALLEY: I'll tell you first that we estimate the time of the building as
1825, based on the records at the library and the type of construction
and the writings on the timbers, you know, by the craftsmen. The home, as
most home of this type, evolved gradually as the requirements of the new
owners expanded. It started off modestly, I think, and you can tell where
they added on to it. You can tell where they got into the Greek revival
and put the portico on in 1854. That was big at that time.

The house, at the time of construction, had to be one of the
earliest homes there. And the way that I determine this is that the earliest
homes were built on the most prominent points, the best locations. This is
one of the best locations, as far as height goes. In heavy rains the water
doesn't stand and the view is commanding.

Major Edmund Winston built the home. I don't know what his military
service was that brought about this title of Major. He had an academy in
LaGrange, teaching boys. It was a military school, I believe, named
Chestnut Hill Academy. In 1847 his daughter married Dr. Whiston Harris.
At that time the house was deeded to Dr. Harris and Major Winston's
daughter. We guess that it possibly could have been a wedding gift.

An interesting thing is that in 1858 Dr. Harris had five children.
They were young--8, 9, 7, that age. He came home carrying, unbeknownst to
him, diphtheria bacteria, probably on his clothing. It was transmitted
to his children, and all five of them died at the home. They are buried



MR. WALLEY: under very large tombstones all in a row. They died within two (Cont'd.)
or three weeks of each other, just one right after the other.

DR. DeBERRY: Is that cemetery on the grounds?

MR. WALLEY: No, that cemetery is the large cemetery. There are several small cemeteries on the grounds, including the plot where Mary Gloucester, the founder of the Immanuel Episcopal Church, is buried.

The home had a major addition in 1854 by Dr. Harris. The workers were from Ohio. We found the contract which was written on wood on the inside of a door facing, between Dr. Harris and a man named Laffrotti, who was a contractor. Then it has a list of each of his craftsmen and their county of origin--not the town of origin, but the county of origin. I remember that one of them was from Champagne County, Ohio. At that time that more or less completed the form in which the house is today.

Originally the kitchen and the dining area were in the basement, which was a daylight basement--half above ground and half below. Then when these new rooms were added, and a portico and a summer porch by Dr. Harris, the kitchen was moved upstairs.

During the Civil War all of the homes in LaGrange, as far as I can determine, were occupied at one time or another--the ones that are left today. They were occupied at one time or another by officers of the Union Army. From the spring of 1862, right after Shiloh, through the occupation--the homes that were not occupied were torn down. There were about 70 large homes such as Reverie and Hancock Hall and Woodlawn that were torn down. The bricks were used to make chimneys for tents, and the timbers were used for firewood in the cold winters. The ones that were left, we pretty well presume, were used for officers quarters.



MR. WALLEY: Reverie was occupied continuously by the Union Army, and the grounds (Cont'd.)

were used for a camp by the calvary. General John Rawlings, who was Chief of Staff for Ulysses S. Grant, stayed at the house while Grant was at Hancock Hall, Rawlings' primary duty, I understand, was to keep Grant's bottle as inaccessible as he could. This gentleman later became Secretary of War under Grant in his first administration, and he died of tuberculosis during the second administration.

Then, General William Smith, who was Commandant of the base and was the officer who issued the order for Grierson's Raid, was headquartered at the house. In my opinion (and this is not substantuated, and I don't know how to substantuate it) but after reading as much as I could about Grierson's Raid and about the 1700 troopers that left LaGrange in April of 1862 for the sojourn down through Mississippi to cut the rail lines, I believe that the raiders assembled in and embarked from what is today our driveway. At that time the driveway was a road named Michie Road. Old maps show the road, and it wound around down past the cemetery down to Wolf River. They speak of passing the cemetery, which was on this road, to cross the Wolf River. The relics that can be found along this road, on the place, by metal finders (geiger counters) indicate that there was a great deal of activity along this road, and constant encampments. You can't walk ten feet in any direction without picking up a number of items, particularly calvalry gear, including the horse bits and calvalry buttons and so on--all sorts of things of that nature. I am speaking of when you scratch down about two to three inches below the surface. Everybody that has been out there has come back with a sizeable assortment of rusty, metal and lead relics--both Confederate and Federal. It's unclear when the transfer took place



MR. WALLEY: between Dr. Harris and the Myrick family, but after the war the (Cont'd.)

Myrick family owned the home. They later sold it to the Beasley family in 1878. Thomas Bass Beasley bought it, and then he deeded it to his son, Peter R. Beasley, who was the husband of Mrs. Beasley at Hancock Hall. They were married and lived at Reverie. Their first child was born there in, I believe, 1909.

Captain Hancock, Mrs. Beasley's father, was up in years at that time, and he and his wife needed someone to look after them. He offered Mrs. Beasley and her husband Hancock Hall as a gift if they would move over and take care of he and his wife until their final days. So they sold Reverie in 1916 to Joseph Hamer, who kept it until he lost it in 1932. The new owner, Robert Eldridge Hunter, was a banker and store owner in Grand Junction. He and his wife and their estate owned it up until 1963 when Betty and I bought the house and restored it. That more or less covers the history of the house--the construction of the house. Are you interested in the construction at all, or would you like to go on to something else?

DR. DeBERRY: Let me ask you a few questions here that I just jotted down.

MR. WALLEY: All right.

DR. DeBERRY: Reverie was built in about 1924, did you say?

MR. WALLEY: 1825.

DR. DeBERRY: 1825.

MR. WALLEY: We say 1825. It could have been '24, or it could have been '26, but it was right around in there. Normally when you put a date on these homes you need a wide spread, because it took them several years to build one.

DR. DeBERRY: Are there any homes that are still standing that were built earlier?

MR. WALLEY: I hear that the old Methodist parsonage across from James Cowan's is in that era, and I have no reason to question it. It's in such a state of disrepair that I don't think the age is worth extensive investigation.

DR. DeBERRY: The sign out in front of the town says 1819. Is that when the town was incorporated, I wonder?

MR. WALLEY: Well, 1819, was the time the town was sort of laid out, I think. At that time it was a Chickasaw settlement. On our property where our cotton field is on the road, was a trading post. They would come and trade, and Indians from other areas as distant as Michigan would come down and trade with these people. Various types of rock and pottery that came from other areas have been found there as a result of this trading. If you are trying to say, find a house that was built in 1819, I wouldn't doubt that perhaps somewhere in one of the homes that is there today, the beginning of it might have been in 1819. As an example, it could have been one room in 1819, and added to later. Or, as was frequent, a small house would burn and another would be built on the same spot.

DR. DeBERRY: The town couldn't have been very old when Reverie was built, or begun.

MR. WALLEY: No.

DR. DeBERRY: Was this always a cotton-growing community?

MR. WALLEY: To my knowledge, the people that settled LaGrange, the farmers, came from South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia, and they grew a wide variety of crops, but always cotton was one of the staples. It is my opinion that the people who came had worn out the land in the East, and probably brought the same seed and everything that they were using over there and tried them out. Cotton gradually became the basis of the economy in farming.



DR. DeBERRY: I talked to Mrs. Beasley, and she said, or I remember reading, that in association with Hancock Hall that there were about six thousand acres, which sounds like a tremendous place to me. Were all the farms in the early days that large, or larger? All of these big homes? What was the acreage of Reverie? Do you have any idea?

MR. WALLEY: Well, I heard, and I say, it was 8,000 acres. The back end of the property extended past the Winchester Line, which was Mississippi. Now, the back end of our property is the Winchester Line today. I don't know if you are familiar with it, but Winchester surveyed the land when they were settling this area. Mississippi contested the Winchester Line, and to settle it an impartial group of surveyors were appointed to settle boundaries between Mississippi and Tennessee. They found that the Winchester Line was incorrect. But unlike Mississippi's contention of it being too far South, it was too far North. It was four miles too far North, as a matter of fact, and Mississippi lost four miles across by contesting it.

DR. DeBERRY: Well, now, let me ask you a little bit about Hillcrest. That was built when, about in the 1840's?

MR. WALLEY: I believe 1840 is the date on Hillcrest.

DR. DeBERRY: Is a good deal of that building the original building?

MR. WALLEY: I think that the building is unchanged. As a matter of fact, it is three stories high, and the third story is unfinished today. As I understood it, Mr. Franklin was to be married and built this Swiss chalet construction. Somehow the marriage didn't take place, and he told a niece that he would give her the home when she was 21 if she didn't marry until that time. She did marry before she was 21, and he sold the home to someone out of the family. It remained out of the family until sometime in the



MR. WALLEY: 20th century when Mrs. William Franklin's husband bought it.
(Cont'd.)

So that is one home, to my knowledge, I can't find where it has been added to. It's just like it was originally.

DR. DeBERRY: It's very modern-looking.

MR. WALLEY: Yes, it was quite out of keeping with the times, or ahead of the times.

DR. DeBERRY: A little bit about the church. Do you know when the church was built?

MR. WALLEY: The Episcopal Church?

DR. DeBERRY: Yes.

MR. WALLEY: Well, I'm a Methodist, so when you say the church. . . (laughter)
Well, I believe that that church was probably founded, as I understand it, around 1836, and the construction probably was (Now, don't hold me to this) but I believe that that building was completed around 1843, in that area. Now, always it's dated to 1836, and I think that that's the time that Mary Glouster brought her relative over to found the church. The Methodist church was built in 1832, but that building was put up, destroyed, put up, destroyed, and the latest sanctuary was built in 1926. The Presbyterian Church blew away.

DR. DeBERRY: Was this in the 1900's?

MR. WALLEY: Right at 1900 the Presbyterian Church blew away. There was a Baptist Church, and probably some other denominations. But the Episcopal building, this particular brick and stucco structure, once it was put up, I don't believe it's been altered. That church, of course, was taken over in Grierson's Raid where all the churches were taken over by the Union Army and used for hospitals and arsenals. Of course, the story goes that they tore out the old pews and used them to make coffins. That probably is true.



DR. DeBERRY: Is there anything in that church left on the inside that was there before the war, do you know?

MR. WALLEY: I really don't know, unless it's the chancel. I don't believe there is any furniture left in there because I understand that it was used as an arsenal and for storage and so forth. All the wood was probably removed except the chancel.

DR. DeBERRY: Now, I need a little information, what you know about it, about Woodlawn. I think that Woodlawn, probably because of the setting, is the house that most people remember when they pass through here.

MR. WALLEY: Yes.

DR. DeBERRY: Is it true that this was built for a country home?

MR. WALLEY: Now, I don't know that. The original builder was a Major Michie, and he was a veteran of the War of 1812, probably with Jackson. I say that because I can't imagine anybody from that era being in the War of 1812 with England going anywhere but New Orleans. But the home was. . . I climbed over this thing just to satisfy my curiosity as to how it is built, and it was a straight, two-story, four-room home with a hallway in the middle, upstairs and down. Somewhere during the Greek revival period, probably in the 1850's, as was done with Reverie, the owner had some columns brought in. Now, I understand that these columns were brought in from the North somewhere. I heard this, but I can't substantiate it. They're not country-made columns, they were brought in and this front portico was put on. When I climbed up there I could see under the eaves there the pitch of the old roof. It's still there. The old roof was like this. If you will notice how the building is like this and the portico comes out to an unusual shape and then down there like this. This was put on during the Greek revival.



MR. WALLEY: And then this "L" was put in the back. So the home has been
(Cont'd.)

added to like most. Now, Hancock Hall, for example, was built in 1858 at the ebb of the Greek revival period, the full glory of the Greek revival era. Its porticos were put on, but something happened. They were supposed to have a balcony. Did you notice that they have a door up there, but it is a door to nowhere?

DR. DeBERRY: Yes.

MR. WALLEY: It indicates that there was an interruption in there, probably at the start of the war. They didn't finish the balcony. So nobody has ever bothered to put a balcony on there. They have a door just out there.

DR. DeBERRY: Do you know when Dr. Pulliam bought Woodlawn?

MR. WALLEY: Dr. Pulliam, I believe, owned Hancock Hall, and he wanted to get out in the country.

DR. DeBERRY: From LaGrange?

MR. WALLEY: Yes, he wanted to go up the road. It's all of a mile and a quarter. If I remember Mrs. Beasley's story about it, there was a trade. That they traded Hancock Hall to someone for Woodlawn, and moved out. Now, I'm unclear on that, but I believe that's the way it was. At the time of that I would think that that would be around 1870.

DR. DeBERRY: Now then, John, the Ames Plantation. Is that actually in LaGrange, or is that in Grand Junction?

MR. WALLEY: First, the Ames Plantation is probably 90% in Fayette County, which is the county in which LaGrange is. Now, Grand Junction is in Hardeman County. There is 28,000 acres on Ames Plantation. Twenty-odd thousand are in Fayette County and the rest in Hardeman. It was LaGrange's postal deal, but back some years ago the post mistress did not want to have delivery--route men, you see, and so the Ames Plantation got the Grand Junction mail route.



MR. WALLEY: That is the reason for the Grand Junction address. Do you know (Cont'd.)
the history of the Ames Plantation?

DR. DeBERRY: No.

MR. WALLEY: Of course, it was a home, a plantation, built, I think, 1847 or '48 by a great uncle of Mrs. Beasley named Jones. It was in that family for generations, and then around the turn of the century, 1902, '03, or '04, in there, Hobard Ames from Massachusetts bought the home, and he bought the land all around for the primary purpose of hunting birds. This was not his avocation, but probably his whole life. He was a very wealthy man engaged in manufacturing axes, handles, and things like that. So he bought, I guess probably, a hundred parcels of land adjoining the original piece of property and put the thing together, and made it the home of the National Field Trials, which it is today. That home is quite large and well built.

DR. DeBERRY: Does anybody live there?

MR. WALLEY: Nobody lives in the home permanently, but it's lived in during the summer months by college students from the University of Tennessee Forestry and Agriculture Department. Then for two weeks a year the trustees live there (of the Ames Foundation) during the Field Trials, and then the various guests stay there. It's completely furnished just like it was when the Ames were there, and very well kept. It's a typical, large plantation home. The old family cemetery there is worth seeing. It's got the founder there, Mr. Jones, and then the first wife and the second wife and these kids and those kids. In fact, back then, you know, you would have quite a number before you would have survivors. They were just little ones. It would bring tears to your eyes to read the epitaphs on all those markers.

DR. DeBERRY: Well, the Ames Plantation, probably something could be done on it by itself.

MR. WALLEY: Yes.

DR. DeBERRY: One other thing, is there, or was there, a great deal of rivalry between Grand Junction and LaGrange ever?

MR. WALLEY: Yes. Well, it was a rivalry to the extent that prior to Grand Junction, as you have probably heard, the citizens of LaGrange planned a railroad from Memphis to LaGrange to Charleston and built it with their own capital. They enjoyed the railroad; it brought goods to the new west here from the East coast-- England and Europe. It could get their cotton over. That was the prime purpose, now. It wasn't to get goods in as much as it was to get goods out. It was to get their cotton over to the coast and then over to the English mills or the New England mills.

DR. DeBERRY: This is the Memphis and Charleston Railroad?

MR. WALLEY: Well, it was the LaGrange and Memphis Railroad.

DR. DeBERRY: Is that where it was started?

MR. WALLEY: Yes. It started LaGrange to what is now White Station. When they brought the first locomotive in, they brought it up the river and then carried it out by wagon to White Station and put it on the track, and then took it to LaGrange, you see, with great fanfare. They said that back then you had wood rails with a metal top, you know, covering. Of course, the floors of the rail cars were wood, and as you went along sometimes these metal coverings for the wood rails would flip up and go right through the wood floor, and you were liable to get gigged, you know. It was rather dangerous to be riding.

Subsequently, a group in Mississippi wanted to join the railroad at LaGrange to a railroad company in Grenada, Mississippi. This was another bunch of wealthy planters who wanted to get their cotton over to the East Coast. When the proposal was made to the people at LaGrange, it was opposed on the basis that they had one railroad and one railroad was enough. So the pushers



MR. WALLEY: of the new railroad moved over to Grand Junction, three or four miles
(Cont'd.)

away, and they joined up and there you had your start.

DR. DeBERRY: John, I think that's about it, unless you have thought of anything else.

MR. WALLEY: I'll think of a hundred things after you have gone.

DR. DeBERRY: Well, thank you.

MR. WALLEY: You're very welcome.



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